

Sections

[Focus](#)
[Columns and Reviews](#)
[Consulting](#)
[Training](#)
[News & Announcements](#)

Archives

[Browse past issues of Praxis](#)

About Us

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Submissions

[Submit an article to Praxis](#)

[Home](#) » [Archives](#) » [Spring 2009 \(Volume 6 Issue 2\) - Writing Across the Curriculum and Writing Centers](#)

What's on Your Wall?

[Spring 2009 / Training](#)

by **Dr. Bonnie Devet**, *College of Charleston*

Erasmus as model for modern writing center



Bonnie Devet

For all writing centers, space is vital. What directors have not begged and cajoled in order to secure a larger room without battered file cabinets and wobbly desks? Besides physical facilities, *space* can also reflect administrative concerns. As Ali Mageebon explains, "Writing centers are academic entities located in many places as part of an organizational chart," such as reporting to a department chair or to the head of an academic support unit (9). Then, again, *space* can even mean a "pedagogical framework" or philosophy where collaborative interaction is the key to learning (Mageebon 9). But as clients saunter into the center, unpack their glistening laptops, and search for convenient electrical sockets, they are not thinking about organizational or pedagogical spaces. They notice something else: the walls.

My center's walls are, unfortunately, mostly bare, except for a colorful poster which migrated with the [Writing Lab](#) at the [College of Charleston](#) (SC) when it traveled from its old cramped quarters to larger surroundings inside a new college library. This reproduction of the 1517 painting by the famous Flemish artist Quentin Massys is distinctive, if not unique, for writing centers because of its topic: Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus –better known to history as Erasmus (1466-1536), the Dutch humanist, noted teacher, and close friend of the *Utopia* writer Thomas Moore. In the painting, Erasmus–clothed head to toe in black with a dashing, crushed felt cap–sits pensively at his writing desk, books piled high, his pen posed as he looks lost in reflection, awaiting

creativity. Such a portrait of a man who lived in the mid-15th to the early 16th century would seem unsuitable for modern centers with their long rows of personal computers and the blue-gray glare of LED laptop screens, modern machines which Erasmus could never have imagined.

Rebel to rebel, it is easy to see Erasmus as a symbol.

It is true that clients who merely glance over at the wall, think Erasmus is only an old guy who is not technologically savvy: Writing with a pen! How so not 21st century.

Careful observers, however, notice that he represents something more: this portrait of “the most famous of Northern humanists” (Kagan, Ozment, and Turner 369) has come—with no little stretch of the imagination—to symbolize writing centers, consultants, and even clients.

Writing centers glory in their campus roles as offering an alternative to the traditional classroom, a place where students can receive one-to-one help in a non-threatening environment (Harris). Erasmus, too, is known for having revolted against the established order, in his case, by translating the Bible into Greek and later into Latin. This rebellious streak, this need to help everyone to read the Bible, fits keenly with centers who reach out to all clients. Rebel to rebel, it is easy to see Erasmus as a symbol.



Erasmus at College of Charleston WL with Molly Lewis and Michelle Byczkiewicz

As well known as he was in his time as a revolutionary, Erasmus was also a renowned teacher, making his living by tutoring. He taught Latin, wrote short dialogues in Latin on how to live well (called *Colloquia*), and even collected famous sayings to help others live better lives, one of his most well-known adages being “Where there is smoke, there is fire” (Kagan, Ozmet, and Turner 369). As consultants conduct sessions with clients, I like to think of their being like Erasmus, that is, teachers who care about their clients, who provide “adages” (of sorts) about writing like “Write a draft and then let it sit” or “Read through your paper aloud to find problems,” and who delight in helping others. Erasmus, then, is a fellow tutor, assisting his students as the consultants do for

their own clients.

But, what probably makes Erasmus' portrait most appropriate for a center's walls is Erasmus' love of language. Believing that the ability to write is at the heart of learning (Kagan, Ozment, and Turner 369), Erasmus produced one of the most well-known books on style: *On Copia of Words and Ideas (De Utraque Verborum ac Rerum Copia)*, where students were given a sentence, such as "Your letter has delighted me very much" and were asked to write one-hundred and fifty variations on it (Erasmus 38). From this exercise, students learned not only different stylistic flourishes but also the almost infinite variations possible when a mind reflects on words. Consultants, too, love language and want their clients to appreciate it as well. Each day, they help clients practice the Erasmus emphasis on varied expression, asking them to rephrase what is not clear, leading students to see the flexibility and sinew of language. Erasmus and modern day centers instill a love for expression.

So, when a center's walls speak volumes (as mine are doing), it is probably time for all directors to be asked, "What's on *your* wall?"

There is, of course, a disadvantage to displaying Massys' painting of the early 16th century Dutch humanist: Erasmus is shown as a *solitary* writer when centers stress that writing is a *collaborative* activity with consultants and clients engaged, questioning, discussing. Removing the portrait, though, will not do. For this poster does represent one aspect of creativity. As Erasmus looks *up* from his writing, his face shows his mind's eye focused inward as if to seize the next thought before it escapes his eager writer's grasp. How many of the center's writers have not also experienced this part of the art of creativity? In fact, most of us learn not from looking down at the printed page but from gazing up to muse and ponder, with the artistic eye turned inward. Most clients must, certainly, feel more at home in the center when another writer –like Erasmus –is going through this same reflective process, a stage through which writers usually journey when creating for any audience and context.

Thus, while the portrait of Erasmus as an isolated writer may not necessarily fit the collaborative model, he is going to hang around. For he has become like a member of the team, another consultant, unpaid, but not necessarily unappreciated, with his portrait appearing in many photographs of the Lab's tutorials, ever present, ever watchful, rather like the famous White House Swedish ivy growing over the fireplace mantel in the room where Presidents and visiting dignitaries sit for photo-ops.

In fact, the more I look at this painting, the more I think Erasmus may be grinning (just a bit), being mightily pleased that he has become a symbol for writing centers (which are his fellow rebels), for consultants (who are his fellow lovers of language and who want to help their clients enjoy the power of style and expression), and even for clients (who are wrestling with the creative process). So, when a center's walls speak volumes (as mine are doing), it is probably time for all directors to be asked, "What's on *your* wall?"

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